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BAR HEBRAEUS AND THE ALEXANDRIAN LIBRARY

BY ISYA JOSEPH

In his *At-târîh* (ed. 1663, p. 180), Bar Hebraeus says that when Yahyâ, the Coptic philosopher, petitioned Umru bn-Al-^cÂş, the Moslem conqueror of Egypt, to restore the Royal Library to the public; the latter referred the matter to Omar bn-Al Ḥaṭṭâb, the second Ḥalîf. The Ḥalîf ordered him to destroy the Library on the ground that if the books were in accord with the Ḳurân, the Ḳurân alone was sufficient, and if at variance with it, there was no need of them; therefore they were to be done away with.

In spite of the definiteness and clearness of this statement and its authoritative source, modern scholars have discredited it and regarded it a Christian scandal against the Mohammedans, on the assumption that no Moslem writer prior to Bar Hebraeus makes any allusion to the incident. Some have even thought it a late insertion in *At-târîh*, since nowhere else in his writings does the Christian historian speak of the event.

That Bar Hebraeus' passage is authentic and based on Arabian authorities is a fact which has been abundantly verified by one who may be considered a very high authority on things Mohammedan. I refer to George Zaidan, the editor of the Cairene Journal *Hilâl*.

In his *History of Mohammedan Civilization* (Cairo, 1904, Vol. III, pp. 41 ff.), Mr. Zaidan acquaints us with his discovery of two independent authorities: one is ^cAbd-Al-Laṭîf of Bagdad (*op. cit.*, p. 41), who visited Egypt in the latter part of the sixth century A.H.¹ In speaking of the past events and remains in Egypt, he says that the Library which was in Alexandria was burned by Umru bn Al-^cÂş in compliance with the order of Omar. The other authority is Jamâl ad-Dîn Al-Ḳuṭṭî, wazîr of Aleppo, who was born in Ḳuṭṭ in upper Egypt (south of Asiut) in 565 A.H., and died in 646 A.H. (*op. cit.*, p. 42). In his *Dictionary of Learned Men*, a manuscript in the Ḥidewî Library, dating from 1197 A.H., Ibn Al-Ḳuṭṭî declares that the Library was burned by Umru bn Al-^cÂş.

¹ He was born in 557 A.H.; died in 629 A.H. Bar Hebraeus was born in 622 A.H.

Mr. Zaidan holds that Bar Hebraeus' passage is taken from Al-Ḳuṭṭī's *Dictionary of Learned Men*. And upon comparison of the two accounts it appears conclusively that Zaidan is right: In both it is stated that Yaḥyâ An-naḥawî witnessed the conquest of Egypt by Umru; that he met the conqueror; that the latter received him cordially, honored him for his learning, and sought his company; that Yaḥyâ petitioned Umru to restore the Royal Library to the public; that Umru referred the matter to the Ḥalīf; that the Ḥalīf ordered him to destroy the books on the ground that the Ḳurân alone was sufficient; and that Umru in turn ordered the books to be burned in the fire-places of the bath-houses of Alexandria. What is more convincing is the fact that the agreement between the two references is verbatim. Such a literal agreement between the two writers is found also in many other instances (*op. cit.*, p. 43), a fact which tends to show that the *Dictionary of Learned Men* of Ibn Al-Ḳuṭṭī was one of the sources from which Bar Hebraeus compiled his *At-tārīḥ*.

Zaidan goes on to trace the accounts of the two independent Moslem historians to still older sources (*op. cit.*, p. 44). He calls attention to the fact that *Al-Fihrist*, where, under the general subject "Philosophers," the founding of the Royal Library at Alexandria is referred to, mentions a certain Ishâḳ's *History of Greek and Roman Learning* as one of the sources from which the information about the origin of the Library in question was taken; and that this account in *Al-Fihrist* is similar to the one given in the *Dictionary of Learned Men*. It appears, Mr. Zaidan concludes, that Ibn Al-Ḳuṭṭī drew his knowledge about the Royal Library partly from such old sources as that which *Al-Fihrist* alludes to, and partly from other old Moslem documents, which, like many others, have been lost to us; and that ʿAbd-Al-Laṭīf took his information from other old records which likewise have not come down to us.

There are reasons for believing that the testimony of these two independent writers is trustworthy. Both were men of thorough scholarship, as well as being accurate in their writings; and they wrote moreover about the events in Egypt after actually being there and making especial investigation.

Mr. Zaidan demonstrates the credibility of Bar Hebraeus' state-

ment of the incident in question not only by the fact that the statement is based on Moslem authorities, but also by the fact that Arabian historians record similar occurrences in other countries invaded by the early Mohammedans (*op. cit.*, p. 45). One such is that when the Moslems entered Persia, the victorious general wrote to the second Ḥalif what to do with the libraries he found there. The Ḥalif, we are told, gave him the very answer he sent to the conqueror of Egypt in regard to the Alexandrian Library—to destroy the books for the reason that the *Ḳurân* alone is sufficient. Again the Arabian chroniclers plainly say (*op. cit.*, p. 45) that wherever the early followers of Mohammed went, they burned all the books they came across.

Zaidan, moreover, goes on to show that destruction of libraries was a common practice among the non-Moslem conquerors also (*op. cit.*, p. 45). Hulako when he captured Bagdad (656 A.H.) cast all the books he found in the libraries of that city into the Tigris. The Crusaders also burned the great library at Tripoli, Syria. So did the Spaniards with the Arabian libraries when they drove the Moslems from Spain. The history of religions, he adds (*op. cit.*, p. 46), tells us that the stronger sect abolished the literature of the weaker one. The annals of Islam make it evident that the desire to destroy all non-Mohammedan literature was so strong among the early believers that it was their common creed that Islam destroyed everything prior to it. This belief is based on their sacred *ḥadīth* that the *Ḳurân* has abrogated all the books which had come before it; and that, therefore, it is incompatible with them. It is to be noticed that the order given by the Defender of the *Ḳurân* to his general in Egypt in regard to the Alexandrian Library is explicitly based on this traditional belief.

Finally Zaidan attempts to answer the question so often raised by modern critics: If the Moslems really destroyed the Alexandrian Library as Bar Hebraeus asserts, why is the event not alluded to by the historians of the conquest? The answer given is that the allusion might have been left out by the later historians who, in the light of their own time, deemed the act unworthy of the early caliphate; or the absence of any reference may be due to some other reasons at present unknown to us.

It may be added, however, that we are not sure that such historians put down all the doings of early Islam. Nor can we be positive that the incident was not found originally in some of them at least, since we know for certain that thousands of books on the history of Mohammedanism have been lost to us, and since we have two independent Moslem authorities prior to Bar Hebraeus, who bear explicit testimony to the fact, and, in addition, since we have indications that these authorities drew their information from yet older sources, lost to us.